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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how a vice principal at a rural Kentucky elementary school successfully implemented curriculum changes to meet the learning needs of young children. The change process also addressed the concerns of kindergarten teachers frustrated with the demands of teaching basal reader activities that eliminated explorative play and other developmentally important activities. Initially, two kindergarten teachers and two administrators attended training sponsored by the Parent and Child Education Program (PACE). PACE advocates the use of the High Scope curriculum, which is based on a child-centered, active-learning approach. By the next school year, classrooms were redesigned and an individualized curriculum was in place. Meetings were held with kindergarten parents to prepare them for program changes. Parents had positive reactions and, after witnessing the benefits of the curriculum, wanted this same approach to carry over to the first grade. Although first-grade teachers were critical of the approach, they agreed to attend training and try some of the advocated practices. The following summer, primary teachers, special education teachers, the school librarian, the curriculum supervisor, and the principal attended training conducted by a certified High Scope certified trainer. Although attitudes of the first-grade teachers presented the biggest impediment to change, faculty from grades K-3 decided to move toward literature-based reading. In 1990, the Kentucky Legislature mandated that all students in grades K-4 not be given standardized tests and that every school move to an ungraded primary model by fall 1992. This move has supported educational change in other Kentucky schools and in addressing the learning needs of young children. (LP)

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A Primary Change from Within a Rural Kentucky School District

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RUNNING HEAD: Primary Change

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A Primary Change from Within a Rural Kentucky School District

For many years I had heard administrators, parents, and teachers complain that schools were not good places for small children to learn. As a vice principal, I had more than once been put in the awkward position of defending hurtful established practices. I had studied for several years at the University of Kentucky about appropriate practices for young children. The more I read about how young children learned, the more my intuitions and experiences were validated. It was there in the findings of Piaget (1952, 1960) and Jerome Bruner (1956, 1964) and in the work of many researchers for the last 35 years. The practices in traditional schools were absolutely counter to the knowledge base of how young children learn.

Four years ago the superintendent of the Nicholas County District, Donald G. Elder, had made me acting principal in grades K-4, the downstairs half of the district's one elementary school, grades K-8.

Now as the concerns of the early primary teachers and parents fell consistently to my purview, I became quite sure that a new kind of primary school was an imperative. I was also convinced that many of our teachers and parents would support a kinder environment.

My most logical cohorts for change were those teachers already trained in appropriate practices for young children. They were the two kindergarten teachers, Ann Baird and Georgia Becker. They had both come to me several times concerned about the pressures of their day. In trying to teach the basal reader activities expected in their current curriculum, they were pushing out the times for centers and the explorative play that was necessary for young learners. They also had a wide range of abilities to contend with, several of these children were possibly mildly retarded, and others might be flagged as gifted and talented in the spring testing. These teachers and I wanted a more individualized and appropriate way to run their classrooms. They knew about my graduate studies and trusted that I could find such a model.

Other supporters for change were in the central office. The Curriculum Supervisor, Jane Becker, had taught in our school 15 years previously when it had been ungraded for children ages six through ten. The Director of Pupil Personnel, Betty Lynn Conrad, had been the acting principal at that time and was another source of support for a change in the primary school. These early childhood advocates would help in the change process. The superintendent also gave me permission to move ahead. The head principal, Gerald Hammons concurred.

With this support, I began a telephone search for a better curriculum model for young children. The state department kindergarten consultant, Kathy Crumm, advised me to call Jeanne Heberle (a source of strong support), the Parent and Child Education (PACE) Program Coordinator. In our conversation, I discovered that the curriculum and training used by PACE was the High Scope Curriculum. I knew from my studies this framework was well imbued with the appropriate practices for young children that were espoused by the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC). According to her, training would be possible for the Nicholas County Elementary School (N.C.E.S.) kindergarten teachers and two administrators. We would be able to attend the workshop being held in a nearby county along with the group that PACE was training that summer.

Then I called the Kentucky State Department of Education, the Office for the Education of Exceptional Children (OEEC) to confirm that it would be possible to use early childhood special education money to finance this training and the changes that would need to be made in the classroom environment and materials. The state department consultant, Maggie Chiara, was more than receptive. The model I described to her assured the least restrictive environment required by (OEEC) as well as providing the active learning that

she knew was especially helpful to young handicapped children. She even gave me tips on how to prepare the early childhood grant that would be forwarded to her office.

The Supervisor of Curriculum helped me write the grant and attended the training that summer with our teachers. By the next school year, we had our classrooms redesigned and our individualized curriculum in place. Before school opened, we had an orientation with our kindergarten parents so they might understand the reasons for our change in curriculum. We met several times for the next few months with guardians, parents and grandparents. We invited parents to visit anytime if scheduled meeting days did not suit their schedules. Most of the reactions from parents were good. These reactions were so receptive of the program that parents started asking what kind of program would their child be going into the next year. We had educated the parents so well that they realized that our primary grades were not appropriate classrooms for young children. These parents wanted the same kind of child-centered, active-learning program for their children in the next grade and then the next. These parents were right. However, I knew that the first grade would be less receptive to change.

One first grade teacher was openly critical of the new kindergarten program. Her main expectation of kindergarten graduates was for them to sit still and copy off the board. Another teacher said she could only teach reading from the basal text. The three other teachers were more discrete in their criticisms, but they too were very hesitant. My supervisors gave me a letter of support in trying to move ahead with our more appropriate model for young children. However before I sought this letter, I discussed the program change again with each first grade teacher individually. Each teacher said she would take the training and try some of the more appropriate practices advocated.

The second grade was more receptive of the idea. They were already working in teams and were implementing active learning in their classrooms. One of the teachers, Dana Lane, was already beginning to work in some whole language activities with her children such as using big books, reading together activities, and writing stories patterned after big books.

The special education teachers were even more receptive of the change. They knew about developmental levels of children and their need for more appropriate methods for teaching very young children. The developmental levels of their children required them to address children's needs on an individual basis. One of these teachers, Lottie O'Bannon, had a masters in

early childhood education; she had the most severely handicapped children and had by necessity moved to physical ways of trying to teach her students. The other teacher, Brenda Lawrence, was emerging in the building as a leader in whole language methods. She had already seen real changes in the enthusiasm and skill of her children because she had moved completely away from the basal reader.

So when the training was held the next summer, there were kindergarten teachers, first-grade teachers, second-grade teachers, special education teachers, the school librarian, the curriculum supervisor and the acting principal (me). Again we had a High Scope certified trainer. This time however we focused on a wider range of developmental needs, but still with the child-centered active learning approach. Of this group, perhaps 50% were really enthusiastic about the program.

The trainer did an excellent job, and when school started, the first grade had decided to implement the whole language component of our appropriate practices model. The second grade was trying much that was appropriate for young children a whole year before the expected date. The librarian, Wilma Donathon, was using library resources and money to support the kinds of materials and books needed for this change.

The first grade still presented the biggest impediment to change. Some said their group of High Scope children from kindergarten were too talkative and could not do as much as the classes before them. (They could offer no test data to support this charge.) One of the first grade teachers was however very happy after her first day of High Scope activities and promised that she could never lock her students in their seats all day again. One teacher insisted that all the children were supposed to do during the day was to play. Another teacher was still convinced that unless a continuum of skills were taught to children they would never learn to read. Another teacher wanted to visit this kind of program in another school. One teacher had trouble with child-centered structure; she saw it as no structure at all. Obviously I had a discontented group.

The previous year a team of teachers and I had written a grant for integrating language across the curriculum. We had received an allotment of $35,000 for Nicholas County grades K-12. This committee decided to use some portion of that money for more workshops that the teachers thought they needed and some go-see-tours of schools which were trying the same kinds of programs that we were doing.

During the following months, the teachers had workshops on Whole Language, Box it and Bag It, writing as a process, and manipulative science. They were taken on tours of a local book warehouse and of schools with the integrated kinds of curriculum found in the Upper Arlington School District in Columbus, Ohio.

The tour of active learning classrooms in an economically successful community helped a great deal. Our teachers that were using whole language most enthusiastically had special classes or low level groups. Therefore many of our teachers had assumed that whole language was only effective for low achieving students. This progressive school in an affluent community was an example that whole language has a broad range of uses. Nicholas County had a high percent of its student population (47%) on free or reduced lunches and many low achieving students, but the Upper Arlington School model seemed to impress our faculty. It gave them a vision of where they would like to be.

By the end of the year there were some successes in change to tally in the first grade. Three of the teachers who had been quite doubtful had volunteered to take a workshop for manipulative math. A grant would pay for their tuition, travel, and lunches for this time but there was no stipend available. They did this study on their own time. All the teachers in the first

grade had incorporated some whole language components. They were using big books, shared readings, writing as a process, writing patterned books, buddy reading (one teacher arranged for buddies to come from the fifth grade). They had all begun to work with their children in manipulative math. Now there were centers in the classroom for art, listening, reading, block construction, dermatic play, and math and science exploration.

At the end of this school year, the faculty met in grades kindergarten through three and decided to move toward literature-based reading, to replace basal readers with real books. As a group they asked for central office funds to help them provide a more print-rich environment in their classrooms.

But the real coup for appropriate practices for young children came from a source that I had had little hope of giving help, the Kentucky State Legislature. In their comprehensive reform package for the spring of 1990, they removed the state mandate that all students in grades kindergarten through four must be given standardized tests. They also mandated that every school in Kentucky move to an ungraded primary model by the fall of 1992. In this model there was to be no retention or promotion for those first four primary years. The task force reform committee had called in experts from many areas of education to help them design a very ambitious and progressive

reform package. One of their consultants had been Larry Schweinhart, a researcher and scholar from the High Scope Institute in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Hooray! This is what had been lacking at Nicholas County, a broad range legal support that what we were doing was necessary and proper. We had known that it was the appropriate action, but we had been hindered by the traditional structure that the school was built on. Traditional report cards, grading practices, retention, ability grouping, and standardized tests had all been hindrances in establishing a more appropriate curriculum for young children.

It is best to retain these children the first four years. That is when it does the most good, was the N.C.E.S.'s fondest rationale. Teachers felt it was their duty to fail children. They worried about what the next year teacher would think if they sent that child on. The concern seemed to be to protect the next year teacher from confronting a wide range of differences. In addition, teachers used ability grouping to manage this range of differences. These practices frequently resulted in lower self esteem for students and lower achievement.

Now the state department is advising multi-age, multi-ability grouping. Cooperative learning, individualized reading, peer tutoring, and computer-

aided instruction are suggested activities to handle differences. There should be no tracking. The reform also mandated that schools must be concerned with a diversity of students and should accommodate these children in such a way as to respect their individual needs and unique background. Ability grouping and tracking has produced a negative labeling of children who do not fit the middle class expectations of the norm.

Tax reform, site-based management, sanctions against nepotism, programs for at-risk four-year-olds, performance-based assessments, sanctions and rewards for schools based on their own improvement, family resource centers, extended programs for students in need of more tutoring, enriched technological resources as well as an ungraded primary are components in an ambitious package of reform for Kentucky. Perhaps the work at Nicholas County had been an internal attempt at improvement, but certainly the legislative reform's edict is going to be a boost of adrenaline. Nicholas County Elementary School has already become a place where other schools go to see the kind of changes that teachers need to make in reforming their own classrooms.

Certainly many of these teachers are at different places in a continuum of moving toward appropriate practices for children. However, if some of the

teachers are still unwilling to change after many inservice programs and such expense on the part of the district, it is my hope that they will be professional enough to request another assignment. Their alternative is to resort to the subaltern kinds of behavior that can ultimately sabotage a program that is meant to hold the concerns of the client, the child, over the concerns of the teacher. That concern for how young children learn is the professional view. That concern for children is the moral view, and thank God that concern for children is now the legal view in Kentucky.

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